

The Mozambican Writer, Lília Momplé

living in the shadow of **COLONIALISM** *and* **Apartheid**

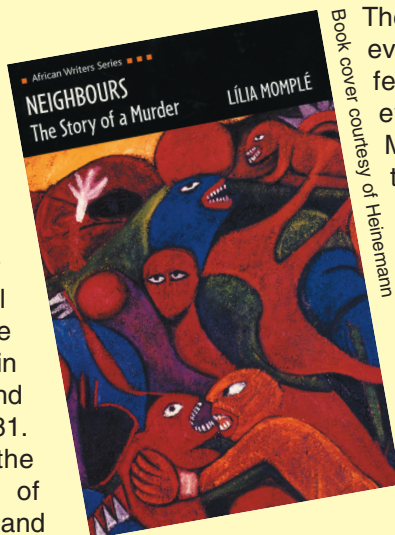
In July 1497, four ships, under the command of the Portuguese navigator Vasco Da Gama, set sail from Lisbon en route to India. The ships rounded the Cape of Good Hope and travelled up the south-eastern coast of Africa. On January 11th 1498, short of water, they put to shore at a place they called "land of the good people" and "river of copper." This was the beginning of a long relationship between Mozambique and Portugal. Gold, later ivory, ensured Portugal's continued interest. In the 1700's the opening up of the Americas and the Caribbean offered an even more lucrative trade and during the next hundred years over one million Mozambicans crossed the Atlantic into slavery. Mozambique formally became a Portuguese colony in the 19th century.

Lília Momplé was born in 1935. After attending secondary school in the capital Lourenco Marques (now Maputo), she completed a degree in social work in Portugal and lived in Lisbon, London and Brazil before returning to Maputo in 1981. Six years before her return, the Independent People's Republic of Mozambique was proclaimed in 1975 and Samora Machel was sworn in as the President of the new marxist state. In the years that followed, the country supported the revolutionary movements in Rhodesia and in South Africa, and, as a consequence, suffered considerable devastation from South African and Rhodesian government-supported offensives.

A TROUBLED HISTORY

Lília Momplé lived through those years of turmoil. Talking of her novel *Neighbours: The Story of a Murder*, which was published in 1995, she says: "I lived through decades when South Africa did as it pleased in Mozambique in order to protect the interest of the apartheid regime. During this period many Mozambicans were killed or had their lives destroyed.

It is to them I dedicate this book."



Book cover courtesy of Heinemann

The events in *Neighbours* take place on the eve of the festival of Eid, a major Islamic feast. Skillfully weaving together present events and past memories, much of Mozambique's complex history is revealed through three different sets of characters, in three separate family homes.

Narguiss, a mother, who "never wanted anything to do with politics," is concerned that her three daughters remain unmarried.

In an apartment opposite, a young married couple, Leía and Januário, eagerly await the birth of their second child. As a young boy, Januário fled the ravages of war in the remote forest village where he was born.

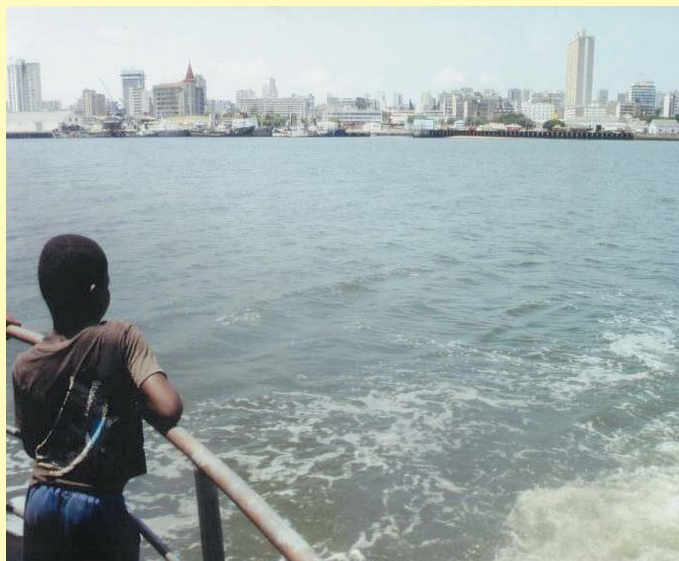
In another part of town, in the home she shares with her husband Dupont, Mena prepares a meal for him and two other men, while they nervously await the arrival of two white South Africans. Mena feels the desire "to cry for something that is about to happen,

but she doesn't know what, and it is this that makes it even more terrifying." Romu, one of the three men who await the South Africans, is motivated by hatred of his own race. His colleague Zaliua is motivated by a greedy thirst for revenge against a system which uncovered his corruption, while Dupont, Mena's husband, has become an accomplice of the other two because of his greed for money.

They plan to kill Leia and Januário who, while not involved in political activity, live next door to members of the African National Congress (ANC). This is part of a plan to weed out support for the ANC in Mozambique. Before morning a number of lives will have changed forever, because of actions motivated by racial hatred, greed and fear.

NOT KNOWING ONE'S PLACE

Lília Momplé won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2001. Her award winning *Celina's Banquet* tells the story of how a mother, Dona Violante, makes a beautiful dress for her daughter, Celina, to wear to her high school graduation banquet. This is the culmination of Dona Violante's long hours working as a dressmaker to earn the money to send her daughter to high school.



The "land of the good people" as Vasco da Gama, in the fifteenth century, called Mozambique, is on the Indian Ocean coast of Africa. Maputo, it's capital, is a busy, modern city.

(photo: wanadoo.nl)



Lília Momplé; "I lived through decades when South Africa did as it pleased in Mozambique in order to protect the interest of the apartheid regime."

(photo: Heinemann)

Celina and an Indian are the only coloured students in a class where "she was able to read in the expressions of most of her colleagues and teachers the interrogation, 'But what is that mulatto girl doing here? Does she not know this isn't her place?'" A recurring theme through this and other writings of Lília Momplé is the Mozambican people's own sense of the superiority of white people; a feature not uncommon among people who have been colonized. Her mother advises her: "Study girl. Only education can obliterate our colour."

It seems the mother's dream of her daughter going to university in Portugal, just like a white person, is about to be fulfilled. Her daughter, she believes, will attend the graduation ball, the major social event of the year, alongside the richest and most important members of colonial society. However, on the day of the ball, Celina and the Indian student are called to the headmaster's office. He explains that the people who are attending the banquet are not used to socializing with coloured people; "to avoid irritation on all sides, we thought it better if you did not come to the banquet."

Lília Momplé writes in Portuguese, the official language of Mozambique. She was Secretary General of the Mozambique Writers' Association from 1995 to 2001 and President from 1997 to 1999. She lives with her husband in Maputo. Her novel *Neighbours* and some of her short stories have been skillfully translated into English. ■

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